

His gaze seemed to be directed to the lower button of his head clerk's waistcoat. "Interference?" he repeated. "Interference? Mr. Grump, you have a reputation for humor, or so I fancy. I've been listening to you trying to bedevil that man out there; but I'm afraid your humor is a little on the slapstick order. And so, if I use a club on you, instead of the point of a rapier, don't take it amiss."

The superintendent raised his head. Their eyes met. The head clerk straightened from shoulder to heel.

"Here is not a request from me, but an order. Sign that man!"

"Yes, Sir."

"And, Mr. Grump, why did you ask all those questions of a man you had no notion of shipping?"

"Why, Sir, I meant no harm by that, Sir. All kinds of men here looking for berths on our ships, and some of them are rather queer ones, you know, Sir, and we like to have a little fun with them."

"Have fun with that man? I wish I had your intellectual nerve."

"You know him, Sir? If I had known—"

"I know nothing of him. I saw him and listened to him as you did. But let me tell you something, Mr. Grump. You're paid six thousand dollars a year here, and presumably you know your business. I get twenty thousand dollars. Presumably I too know my business. But when you or I reach a stage where we can have fun with that man out there, then you and I won't have to content with our relatively subordinate and unimportant positions as head clerk and superintendent of the marine department of the Northern & Southern Oil Company."

"Subordinate positions, Sir?" The head clerk was staring.

"Exactly. And, Mr. Grump."

"Yes, Sir."

"Why is it that that man don't seem to stay long on one of our ships, especially on the Rapidan?"

"I couldn't say, Sir."

"No? Well, possibly I can find out. I'll take passage on the Rapidan this trip. But say nothing about it to anybody, mind. If the Captain wishes to know something more of the passenger, say that it is a friend of the third or fourth vice president, or of one of the directors, of the oil company, or the stenographer, or—"

"or anybody at all, making a little sea trip for his health, or for any other reason that enters your head. And his name," he picked up the telephone directory, inserted the blade of his paper knife, opened the book, and laid the knife across the page, "Noyes. Noyes sounds all right. Tell him Mr. Noyes. And that's all for now, except that you sign that man."

"Yes, Sir." The reorganized head clerk clicked his heels, marched to his desk, and without delay signed John Kierman as passenger for the gulf voyage of the ship Rapidan.

[Packed two minutes before sailing time, and the passenger was in the cabin messroom, when he heard the exclamation, "Here he comes now!"

He looked through the air port. Out on the deck was a huge fellow, standing up the dock. The passenger, who knew the big man for the bo's'n, gazed up the dock and saw that it was the pumpman coming; and he was singing as he came:

Our ship she was a laborin' in the Gulf o' Mexico,  
The skipper on the quarter, with eyes aloft and low,  
Says he, "My bucko boys, it's a surely goin' to blow!  
Take every blessed rag from her, strip her from toe to toe,  
And we'll see what she can make of it!"  
And—Oh, my eyes, it blew! And blew and blew!  
And blew and blew! My soul, how it did blow!  
Aboard the Flying Walrus in the Gulf o' Mexico.  
The sea—

He leaped to one side. A heavy block, triple sheaved, bounded on the steel deck beside him. The pumpman looked up. Above him, between two forestays, was the bo's'n, rigging up some sort of hoisting arrangement.

"Fine business! But did you think for a minute, you stall fed squash, I didn't have my eye on you?"

It took the bo's'n a minute or two to find his tongue. When he did, it was to say, "Young fella, did you ship for a opera singer or what?"

The pumpman called back sweetly, "I shipped for what you'll find my name signed against in the articles, and I'm on the job every minute. And I'll go on singing if it pleases me. And if it pleases me, I'll finish that song too."

"Not on this ship you won't, 'less you sing it in your sleep and me not in hearin'! You—"

"I'll finish it on this ship, Son. And it won't be in my sleep, and you'll be within hearing."

A group of deckhands snickered, and the bo's'n pretended to climb down from the rigging. "You swine! What the—"

They retreated in terror. "We wasn't laughin' at you, Bo's'n."

"Well, see that yuh don't, yuh cross eyed whelps—see that yuh don't!"

"And do you mean to say, you bunch of pikers, that you were laughing at me?" The pumpman, still grasping a wrench in each hand, started across the deck after them. "D'ye mean to—"

Down the gangway they retreated in a body.

THE passenger went down to luncheon, and after luncheon took his cigar and his book to his room. When next he came out, he felt that something had happened since the little adventure of the falling block. The Captain was pacing the bridge

and listening from the cabin messroom, it looked like the finest kind of battle; but just then the Captain came up the gangplank calling out, "Cast off those shore lines! And don't fall asleep over it, either!" The deck force scattered to carry out his orders. The pumpman picked up his suitcase and went on to his quarters.

NEXT morning (the ship by now well down the Jersey coast and the passenger on the bridge by the Captain's invitation) again was heard the caroling voice:

Our ship was a laborin' in the Gulf o' Mexico,  
The skipper on the quarter, with eyes aloft and low,  
Says he, "My bucko boys—"

That far when the big man's hoarse bass interrupted, "Say you, what about that Number Seven tank?"

"—says he, 'My bucko boys, it's a surely goin' to blow—' What about Number Seven?" He inclined his head, set one hand back of his ear, and added, "And speak up, Son, so I can hear you."

"Speak up!" The bo's'n roared to the heavens. "Speak up! Don't tell me to speak up! Did yuh clean that tank out?"

"No, I didn't clean it out."

"Yuh didn't? And why in blank didn't yuh?"

"Because I don't have to. But I put a couple of men to work and saw that they cleaned it out. And it was done before you were out of your warm bunk this morning."

"Who's that?" The passenger put the question to the Captain.

"That's my bo's'n—and a good one."

"And the other? Know anything of him?"

"The singing one? Nothin', except he's the new pumpman. And I can see right now it won't be many hours afore the bo's'n'll beat his head off."

"You think he will? Why, look at him—the size of him, and solid's a rock."

The passenger took another look over the top of the bridge canvas. He was surely a big man; and, under his thin, sleeveless jersey, surely a solid man. And the pumpman, in his skimpy, badly fitting dungarees, though of good height, did not look to be much more than half the other's bulk.

"That same bo's'n's beat up more men than any shipping agency ever kept a record of. That's Big Bill. And if you'd ever traveled on oil tankers, you'd a heard of him. He's a whale. Take another look at him, Mr. Noyes."

Noyes took another look. The bo's'n surely was a tremendously muscled man. He was knobbed with muscle. But Noyes had his own opinion about the two men, and he ventured to voice it now.

"But he's a wonderfully quick moving fellow, Captain. And he's surely got nerve. Look at him leap across that open hatch! If he fell short he'd get a thirty-foot drop and break his neck."

"And I wish he would break his neck! And so can a kangaroo hop around; but you wouldn't pick a kangaroo to fight a bull buffalo. You'll find out the difference, if ever he tackles my bo's'n. And no fear my bo's'n won't get him. He'll get him, you see! And when they come together, I'll take good care there's no ship's officer around to interrupt."

"But why does the bo's'n hound him so? This man was no sooner aboard than he began to jump him."

"Did he? And perhaps you think the bo's'n of an oil tanker's goin' to hand a man a typewritten letter every time he wants to have a word with him? He's a good bo's'n. He knows his business, and he saves me a lot of trouble."

And what the Captain did not say, but what Noyes imagined he saw in his eye, was, "And I'll be telling you pretty soon to keep to yourself your opinion of ship's matters."

WHEN Noyes went to his room that night, it was for a stay of two days. More than a year now since he had been to sea, and the weather passing Hatteras had been bad. But now it was the fourth day out, and Hatteras was far astern, and the ship was plunging easily southward, with the white, sandy shore of Florida abeam. A fine, fair day it was, with the Caribbean breeze pouring in through the air port. The passenger dressed. Above him he could hear the Captain dressing down somebody. He stepped out on deck.

It was two sailors who had complained of the grub, and he made short work of their complaint. "I'll give you what grub I please. And that's good grub." That and more, and drove the two sailors, with their dinners on their tin mess plates, down to the deck.

Noyes, who remembered that the company allowed fifty cents a day each man for grub, took a look and a

whiff of the protested rations as the men went by. "Phew!" He ascended to the bridge.

The Captain turned to him. "Did you see those two? Grub! What do they know of grub? In the hoveles they come from they never saw good grub."

Noyes made no answer. He was interested just then in the pumpman, who now came strolling along and presently overtook the protesting sailors. The better to observe proceedings, Noyes took his station on the chart bridge aft.

"And did you fellows think that any polite game of conversation up on the bridge was going to get you a shift of rations?" the pumpman was saying. "Don't you know that what he saves out of the ship's allowance goes into his own pocket? What you fellows want to do is to go and scare the cook to death, or halfway to it. If it's only for a couple of days, it'll help. Here, let's go back and shake him up. Besides, we might as well have a little fun. You'd think it was a crime to laugh on this ship. Come on."

The galley was a little house by itself on the after deck of the ship. Noyes saw the pumpman call out the cook, and after a time, their voices raising, he heard, "Now, Cooky, no more of that shuck! Mind you, I'm wasting no time talking to the Captain. I'm talking to you. We know that he ships you a little ten-spot every month for keeping down the grub bills; but, even if he does, you'll have to dig out something better."

"I'll give you what I please!"

"You will, will you?" The cook was a good sized man, and he held a skillet in his hand; but he was taken by surprise. The pumpman whipped the skillet from him, whirled him about, ran him into his galley, and closed and bolted the door behind him. A stovepipe projected from the roof of the galley. The pumpman climbed up, stuffed a bunch of wet cotton waste into the stovepipe, and then, with a valve which he seemed to be taking apart, took his stand by the taffrail.

Every few minutes he got up from his valve, put his ear to the door of the shack, and listened. After twenty minutes or so he opened the door and took out the cook and held him over the rail. He was gulping like a catfish.

NOYES looked up to see if the Captain had witnessed the little comedy. Evidently he had; for he was swearing to himself. Noyes was still chuckling over the picture of the scared cook, when the pumpman came walking forward. He was swinging a pair of Stillson wrenches, one in each hand, as if they were Indian clubs, and singing as he came:

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